

## Art Deco Grinch No More

When I was growing up in Napier, along with the pure artesian water of the region and a summer diet of stone fruit and apples, I absorbed stories of destruction, survival and, most importantly, rebuilding. I took the architecture, which was, and still is, stand out different from any where else, for granted. In fact, in my teens I thought the buildings were ugly. I wasn't the only one. It was the seventies and the designs of Louis Hay and his compatriots had fallen out of favour. Skyscrapers were the thing, although we'll probably never have those in Napier - we got our first and only escalator last year. The plain facades of the art deco buildings, in my memory at least, were a dull grey. The interiors, dingy. More often than not the native wood trims were covered with white paint. To bring in the light, was the rationale of the times.

By the 1980s wrecking balls were a common sight. The iron reinforcing used after the 1931 earthquake took some bashing before those buildings came down. Eventually, people realised what treasures we have; the Art Deco Trust was formed and some of the key buildings were saved. And then celebrated. And now that celebration is a major tourist event. On the third weekend in February each year people come from all over world to join in the fun. My favourite cafes, shops, the route from my house to the supermarket, to the beach, to the library, are over run by Art Deco enthusiasts. They're easy to identify. The men are dressed in waistcoats and straw boaters, the women mostly in the style of 1920s flappers. Despite the searing February heat Hawkes Bay usually turns on there are always some who can't resist the opportunity to bring out their stoles. I have usually avoided town through Art Deco Weekend. I'll admit, although the festival is undoubtedly good for the city, I might have grizzled about the inconvenience it can cause.

That all changed this year when I received an invitation to join the Pea Pie Pud steam train run to Otane. I like trains and I like travelling on them. I was only three when my parents took me to see the last scheduled steam train to leave Napier railway station. The hiss of the steam from the engine awed me. Years later, riding in the rail car to Palmerston North was an adventure. There

was a viaduct, a small one but a viaduct nevertheless, and there were tunnels in the gorge - they've been day-lighted now. Once, not that long ago, I caught a train, Amtrak it was, from Minneapolis to New York, just so I could arrive at Penn Station. It took two days. From the viewing platform I saw Bald Eagles and early snowfall in Wisconsin, and the fall colours along the banks of the Hudson.

So, Art Deco grinch or not, I was a starter for this trip. Even the news that I was expected to dress-up didn't put me off. I needed help though and I found it at the Tabard Theatre. They run an excellent costume hire service. I explained my plight to the assistant and with one or two pertinent questions she had me sussed. The very first outfit she selected did the job - a frock, with a large lace collar and pleated skirt, hat and gloves to match. Suddenly, my grandmother regarded me from the mirror. A lucky find at a second hand shop secured a purse large enough for modern essentials: phone and credit cards.

In for a penny, in for a pound is the old saying and my Art Deco experience quickly grew from that one train trip to an all day event. It began with brunch at Mr D's , a popular cafe in a tastefully restored building. With all the Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein look-a-likes and we might have been on The Left Bank of Paris in the 20s.

And what better to do after our fill of brioche and coffee than promenade down the main street. Jazz bands performed at each corner, people danced in the street, and the warbirds buzzed the city, looping the loop again and again. The ice-cream stall in the market at Clive Square, the site of the post earthquake Tin Town, did a roaring trade as the mercury nudged past thirty. A crowd of more than ten thousand gathered to watch the vintage car parade. It was the atmosphere that was striking - everyone was out for a good time, to have a bit of a laugh, to entertain and be entertained. I did feel sorry for some of the participants, especially the pipe band. Kitted out in their tartan regalia they marched through the city streets in the full force of the searing mid day sun.

At four o'clock I joined a couple of hundred others on the platform of the old Napier Railway Station. We sizzled with anticipation and from the heat. This was no ordinary train service. There isn't one for passengers any more on the Napier line.

Steam Inc. have faithfully restored their engines and carriages. The red leather upholstery seats and rimu panelling evoke the elegance and attention to detail of times past. Above each seat was the metal holder where once passengers names were displayed for all to see. Ah, nostalgia. I found myself longing for the golden olden days. When things were made to last. When travellers knew each others names, when the Privacy Act belonged in some future dystopian novel.

I suspect that restoring trains and recreating the past gets in to the blood, becomes an obsession for some. The crew even managed to make the safety instructions interesting. Don't put your head, arms or anything else out the windows they reminded us from time to time. And as the train navigated some of those bends I could see why - we were up close and personal with clay banks.

It was a two hour trip to Otane. At first our pace was very slow. Partly due to the full load of coal on the tender and partly due to speed restrictions required because of the day's high temperatures. Along the sea front we were overtaken by a family on push bikes. To be fair they did have a tail wind and no doubt had risen to the challenge of outstripping the train.

At every intersection the clanging of the alarms and the toot of the train alerted those waiting we were on our way. Cars were pulled over, cameras were out, children chased the train and adult spectators waved. White gloves lend themselves to an elegant return wave. I got the wave right but not the slightly disinterested, perhaps even disdainful expression of the privileged. Yes, somewhere along the way I'd lost my supercilious attitude to all things Art Deco. All over my face was the cheshire grin of the novice. Not all the time. Walking across the gantry while the train lurched around corners took concentration. And standing on the outside viewing platform with nothing but a metal bar, a very old metal bar, between myself and potential oblivion was a bit of a white knuckle affair, but not enough to make me return to my seat. The wind in my face, the smell of hot summer

grass, the clanking of the carriages, the chuffing of the engine, and the occasional drift of coal smoke were sensations worth savouring.

At Otane we disembarked onto a grass verge - there's no train station in this small village off the main road between Napier and Palmerston North. The crew were on stand-by to assist those with mobility difficulties. What Otane does have is a thriving community, most of whom had turned out to meet us. Some to welcome and some to entertain. For some we were the entertainment. They sat in chairs set out along the footpath to watch us promenade to the town hall for our dinner. I'd have done the same.

Our meal was prepared and served by a group of hard working and cheerful women. It was simple fare. Pea, pie and pud, exactly as advertised. It was a very decent meat pie, from the crisp and yet not too buttery pastry, to the generous meat filling, perfectly laced with worcestershire sauce. Delish! Afterwards I washed it down with a glass of red from the local pub and watched the dancing in the street. The music was provided by Cabin Fevre, a local band with quite a following.

At sunset it was time to embark for our return to Napier. It was a faster, quieter trip. There was less chatting and less exploring. We were all weary from our adventures. Some nodded off - not me. I didn't want to waste a moment. My days as an Art Deco grinch are gone for good. I'd do this again, anytime. All of it.